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### Playing with fire, and rocks

Schtick in 'Ug, the Caveman Musical' will tickle your funny bone

**Review** — I couldn't stop laughing at "Ug, the Caveman Musical." In the paleolithic musical comedy that opened Friday night at Camelot, a cast of dim-bulb cavepeople send up every cliché of the let's-put-on-a-show genre once beloved of Broadway and Hollywood.



Q Zoom

**By Bill Varble**  
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Maybe I'm a lightweight at heart, but after a slow start, the (very) prehistoric take on show-biz schtick never stopped being funny.

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- 'Ug, the Caveman Musical'

Lights up on designer Don Zastoupil's prehistoric set, the aesthetic of which runs to, well, rocks. Cue the swelling sounds of Richard Strauss's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." And we're off.

Ug (Tyler Ward) is the leader of a prehistoric tribe that's making some momentous discoveries. Fire. Clothes. The fact that meat tastes better if you throw it in a fire (after making sure it's dead by hitting it on the head with a rock).

A song that goes with one of these discoveries, a cheesy number called "The Cooking Song," finds caveman Bob (Peter Wickliffe) explaining at great length how to cook boar, fish, snake, whatever. The joke is that each dish is cooked exactly the same way (hit it on the head with a rock, throw it in the fire), but Wickliffe's manic energy, Sarah Gore's clever choreography and the song's sheer goofiness get laughs every time.

"These Are Incredible Times" finds our cavepeople marveling at the latest technological advances, much as their descendants in a certain high-tech, postmodern future will enjoy doing.

In a quick exchange with the fetching Bandala (Kendra Taylor), Ug casually invents monogamy to ensure that you can tell which kids are yours. What a concept!

Moments later Ug invents live theater when he begins telling the story of killing a boar for meat for the tribe by using the present tense and "acting out" instead of just telling ("We are not here, we are there ...").

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Up to this point "Ug" wandered. It took several songs and a string of eye-rolling jokes establishing the caveman milieu for "Ug" to find its story, though why this should be is not clear, since we know and accept all the dumb caveman riffs (fire will burn you, etc.).

With Ug's invention of the drama things pick up and never slack off. The tribe will not only invent theater but create the first play in order to put on a show for members of The Tall People, a visiting tribe.

With songs such as "Where I've Never Gone Before" and "Famous," Ug and his animal skin-clad cohorts quickly discover such showbiz tropes as creative differences, actor-director conflicts, sensitive gay designers, prima dona actresses and producer's notes.

We see the birth of the director, as Arg (Chun-Han "C.H." Chou) picks up Ug's idea and runs with it, inventing such theater conventions as upstage and downstage, lighting (provided by the cooking fire, which we never see) and the "fourth wall" through which audiences ever after will peer at the actors.

The humor is based on flashes of recognition. Things are funny not because they are new to us, but because of the recognition that we know them. In a process akin to reverse engineering, writer Jim Geoghan and company deconstruct stagecraft by imagining the act of tracing it back to its comical roots.

The plot thickens as cave hottie Tatata (Kelly Jean Hammond, the subject of the funny song "She's Run Out of Guys") covets the role of the boar and maneuvers to wrest the part from Ug's love interest, Bandala. Hammond's brash, blonde Tatata combines the wink-wink sexuality of Mae West with the deviousness of a Bette Davis character.

The Big Entrance of Chief Oolooki of the Tall People (Bob Herried) and his minion, Fatalataba (Max Gutfreund) is the dramatic climax of the play (ours, not Ug's). Herried hams it up ("Being humble is a drag, when you know you're the King Neanderthal") like Mel Brooks teleported into a Golden Age MGM musical.

The direction by Roy Von Rains, Jr., is brisk throughout, and the musicians (Karl Iverson, Peter Spring, Steve Sutfin) deliver the score with spirit. A video by Brian O'Connor depicting Ug and Bandala on a magic carpet-like ride is gleefully fresh and surprisingly funny, especially as our heroes draft some low-flying pterodactyls over a landscape that looks suspiciously like Oregon.

Rick Rhodes, who wrote the music along with Geoghan and Vivian Rhodes, worked in TV, and "Ug" has both the best and worst features of a snappy, sitcom sensibility. It's fast-paced and accessible but predictable. As a musical, it won't make you forget "West Side Story," but neither does it aspire to do so. And these idiots will make you laugh.

Bill Varble writes about arts and entertainment for the Mail Tribune. He can be reached at varble.bill@gmail.com.

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